



A STORY BY VICTORIA LECOUTIERE

CHAPTER I

If only the man knew... If only he knew of his blasphemy.

After passing the vibrant colors of the market the man's met with the imposing architectural marvel of which he can't comprehend the scale from merely one angle, illuminated by the afternoon sun the bricks feel warm and welcoming whilst still demanding respect.

Looking at the cathedral feels like remembering a memory that fled your brain a long time ago. It looks old, yet he can't remember what elements seem ancient to him. It's as clean as if it was built yesterday, but he knows it's been there longer than that, yet there's probably no one who could tell you when it was built. It must've been built before everything had to be written down. Who knows how long ago that must've been?

The blue summer sky contrasts the warm shades of the marble bricks arranged into five organically detailed walls forming the pentagonal layout of the cathedral. Every one of these walls is graced by a centered tower, decorated with a level of detail not even matched by any other parts of the building, each tower taller than anything built before or since, except for the wall facing the man.

This wall has no tower, instead it has its center marked by large wooden doors that greeted the man from afar when he approached the main square where he stands now. That entrance must've never been opened, since everyone enters through the tiny copper doors on both sides of the cathedral. The man enters. He prays. He doesn't remember who he's praying to. He just knows he has to pray. The priest will come and remind him who God is, like he does every day. Neither of them ever remembers it.

They sit together for a while in silence not knowing how to pray. Both of them saw their note in the morning. The priest's note said: "preach" the man's said: "pray". Neither of them knows what that really means, but they're happy to have someone who doesn't know either.

After a while of sitting on one of the many wooden benches surrounded by statues, unnamed until you try to decipher the letters hiding beneath layers of rust on the plaques, the man asks if they're supposed to be doing anything else. The priest speaks in a soft deep voice: "I can give you the eucharist."

"What's that?"

"It's a tiny coin of bread of great symbolic value."

The man nods, not in understanding what that means, but in understanding that he's supposed to accept it. They walk towards the altar and the priest orders the man to stay there as he opens the small safe with a bowl inside it. He grabs a

little white circle and offers it to the man.

"As you take it say: Amen"

"Amen"

A few small ink marks on the man's hands catch his own eyes as he brings the bland circle to his mouth.

The man walks back out through the small copper door, he finds himself on the colorful square again. The day is almost over so the man walks over to the nearest bench, which happens to be positioned within hearing distance of a particularly lively conversation happening at an outdoor table of a small café. The lady with orange oval sunglasses almost matching her red hair put up into a bun, with a surprising comment, stuns the man wearing a red hat atop his blonde hair with a silvery yet warm shine: "Yesterday was a lot of fun!"

"You remember yesterday?"

The lady clarifies: "Yes. Uhm. I'm rather lucky in terms of memory. I sometimes remember moments for over a week, I even remember some things that happened years ago, but it all lacks specifics, I'm sure you know how it is."

"Do you remember how we met?"

"Vaguely."

Unsatisfied with that answer the blonde man blurts out: "Tell me everything."

"I think it was about 2 years ago. You saw me sitting alone... I don't remember where, it was very loud. And then we had drinks I think... I don't know anything else from that year."

The man on the bench wonders if the lady's lying or perhaps his gut feeling is completely delusional. Suddenly the lady turns to him: "I recognise you! You're in danger! Hide!"

The blonde man gestures to her to sit back down: "Shut up! You're drawing attention."

While walking home the man can't shake the weird feeling the interaction with that crazy lady gave him, and the blonde man's reaction wasn't too reassuring either. He passes by shop owners closing their doors or quickly scribbling some notes on a piece of paper they'll leave on the counter for tomorrow. The orange light of the sun paired with the rather unfamiliar yet welcoming streets sets the man at ease that maybe nothing changed, maybe today was yesterday and tomorrow will be today too.

Something's in his pocket, he feels and it seems to be a pen. Strange. Not that far out of the ordinary but still not what he expected, but he didn't really have any expectations he could've based on his day long memory anyway. He keeps

walking, making his way to his apartment.

His hand's on the doorknob. He notices his key isn't necessary to open the door-someone's inside. He wants to call for some help, but who and how? He steps away from the door he now left ajar. His breathing feels slower, but he most certainly is hyperventilating. He tries to think what to do but his brain blanks. He dashes inside ready to scream at the top of his lungs, but no sound comes out of his mouth when he sees the man in a uniform standing behind the kitchen counter of his apartment. He simply gasps. The man in a uniform introduces himself simply as "officer" while slowly approaching the man whose apartment was seemingly just broken into but who still manages to utter: "This is my apartment. You should leave."

"First of all: wrong. And don't worry I will leave."

"Then why are you here?" The man asks the officer.

"You only get one question before I do my job. You have 5 minutes to think it over, forcefully trying to remove me will rob you of the opportunity to ask this question before death."

With the officer still in his apartment the man walks over to his desk to open a drawer, where he puts the pen back. In that same drawer the man notices a copy of what would be best described as a newspaper. It's better to leave that there.

The man returns to the officer. His heartbeat beating out of time. He's still pondering what to ask, but he opens his mouth and starts to speak anyway: "You mentioned death, which did make me wonder whether you intend to kill me-"

The man notices the empty gun holster and a gun in the officer's hand but continues: "if you do intend to kill me I'd like to know for which crime I will be executed, if not I'd like to know why we forget."

The officer takes a theatrical breath before answering: "I can't tell you why we forget for I don't know that myself, luckily you will be executed thus I only have to tell you your crime. Well, it's very simple really, you, my dear friend, are a writer, but that's not really a crime now, is it? You are a writer for an unauthorized propaganda newspaper. You are the author of the horrible blasphemy which appeared in that small propaganda project yesterday, for which you will now ascend to heaven, if that's what you believe."

BANG.

The officer reaches into his pocket for a tissue with which he wipes the blood splatter from his face as he exits the apartment leaving the dead writer bleeding stains onto the white carpets that change with every tenant. The still warm body will be cleaned up before sunrise and our cold planet keeps turning without a care in the world. Tomorrow will be today too.

CHAPTER II

Waking up feels heavy, but soon enough all the weight shifts from my consciousness to a room in the back of my head. Brain feels reset and I'm ready to take on the day. I look around for any hints to who I am, Cecilia, mechanic, working at... Oh there's the address. I grab the set of clothes I remember having prepared yesterday and head off to work with a map in my hand carefully following the path outlined by my own hands presumably years ago. I do at least partially remember how I'm supposed to go, maybe someday I won't need my map. I see new face after new face, and I wonder if the world feels young on this sunny morning, not weighed down and aged by yesterday. Oh, I recognise a face, I must've seen her walk by sometime this week. Once inside my garage I quickly glance over the manual, my muscle memory does the rest. I ask where we store our tools despite having a strong suspicion, I grab them and get to work.

```
/scanData all
Processing...
New info found. Do you wish to access it? Y/N
/submit Y
Requesting data...
Ready. ID: newData
/printData newData (Name, NameNote, Memory)
Name: unregistered individual
NameNote: Cecilia
Memory: 6/10 (max. acceptable level: 3/10)
/forwardData to /gov
```

As I walk outside for my break an airbike races past. It doesn't really fly, but it has wings just big enough to sustain it in the air for about 5 minutes. The wings have to be really small to fit through the alleys of the city. It's probably one of the most dangerous transportation devices ever made. They shoot the bikes out at velocities nearing sonic speed. Luckily it was voted a few years ago that only four routes are legal to airbike.

When I was younger we used to go to races with my mum and also with my little brother. I was 16, if I'm not mistaken and that's a big if, when I witnessed the last legal race ever. The tragic crash that day took 14 lives, one of those lives was mum and my little bro-

The bike flying by shakes up memories and my gut turns inside out. I flinch. Fight the tears. I need to keep them down, it was 5 years ago. I remember.

Standing there. Covered in red. Surrounded by red. Soaked in red. All I can see is red. So. Much. Red. I see the blood splashing in slow motion before my eyes even today looking at the bike reflecting the bright sunlight. I miss them. So much.

I don't remember anything else from those days, all I have are journals detailing days I don't recall. I should read those notebooks again tonight, it's been a while, I think, I can't know for sure.

I go back inside to work on the robot arm I was soldering back together.

You have two unread messages.

/messages list

Alysa.gov : Cecilia

James.off : cleanup required

/messages open Cecilia

Subject: Cecilia

You're required to forward this to investigative services. We need her on our radar, under monitoring she should not be much of a threat since she's not known to be aware of her memory. She seems to be a harmless error without immediate connection to actual danger. I will forward this to lab, since they made a mistake they did not inform us about. If I obtain further clarification you will be informed.

I dig through drawers filled with old diaries, I pick one and start to read. There's something particularly alien about reading the words "I love my mom" when I can't even picture her and if I try to remind myself how she looks I only see the explosion of blood and shreds of flesh of her and other bystanders and her glasses flying. I feel my hand tremble anytime I turn the page and find new memories that I'll forget again by tomorrow. I should go do something better with my day. I go for a walk avoiding all the airbike routes.

I stand before the cathedral. I wonder, as I always do, how old it is. The square feels much more welcoming than the copper doors so I walk up to a bench and sit down. I feel a stare. Slowly I turn around and face a lady with orange glasses sitting a few benches away from me. I don't know if she was watching but she's certainly noticed me now. I get up. I walk away. Fast. I don't know much but I know weird things happen to weird people, so I'd rather stay far away.

/messages open Re:Cecilia

Subject: Re:Cecilia

Lab has appointed Will.lab to work on this incident. A file is to be posted by admin.

/newFile from:Cecilia.data, localName:Cecilia

File created with fileID 26512 and localName Cecilia

/add Alysa.gov

Added Alysa.gov

/add Will.lab

Added Will.lab

/print FileDescription

Cecilia doesn't seem to be a threat currently but is to be placed under strict supervision.

/addNote "Lab needs to clarify how this incident has occurred."

Before I go to bed I prepare my clothes for tomorrow and write myself a little note about the weird lady at the square. I hope it was nothing, but can't know for sure. I lie down and put the blanket over me, ready to forget.

CHAPTER III

I am but a pawn in a game larger than any one of us imagines. We love to feel big, but when the smallness comes knocking it overwhelms every sense of self you might've had. It turns out I am an ant. An ant on a mission. I grab my gun from the shelf and conceal it under my sweater. I don't want to kill but I serve freedom and history above all. We used to live in a world where serving thy neighbor was enough, but today I can't trust anything but pieces of paper I left myself. Without trust there can be no love between neighbors, and trust needs time and memories. I don't trust a single soul. Trusting myself is a foolish move already, but I've got no other options up my sleeve.

You are one of the most valuable assets to modern society. You are a lab worker. You've done this job for years now. Before humans enter society it's of highest importance to prepare them. This happens through different processes. The first steps happen while the individuals are still fetuses. Their brains have to develop in a manner that their experience of the world is colored through a useful lens. The next stages are where you come in. We simulate birth and the susceptible brains easily take up the chemicals, necessary for modern life, that you provide to the newborns. [...]

The screen goes on to explain every technical detail of the process to a very attentive lab worker. After the presentation is over she walks over to her work station and begins her work.

She holds up the vial filled with red fluid. It glistens in the sickly green light. She's apparently done this every few days for the past couple of years the screen told her this morning. She puts it in a container detailed with organically flowing silver lines onto the gold background. A red light flickers on the side of the box. She flips the switch next to the hinge to lock it all in place. She turns one last knob and the machine purrs. Then it hisses. And finally it produces a buzz that obnoxiously resonates through the lab.

She grabs another vial and repeats the process. A metallic clang reaches her ear. The first vial is done. She opens the container revealing an empty vial and a syringe filled with green liquid. She glances at her screen: 15 newborns. She puts the syringe in the fridge and counts.

"One more", she mumbles.

I trust the research I seem to have done. I trust the pieces of paper wedged between my bed and wall. I trust whatever game master sent me here. I stand before a door, my eyes fixed to the lock. I step back preparing to kick the exact

spot detailed on page 4 of my notes. BANG! The door comes down. I run inside. I've got about 5 minutes before security notices me on their cameras. Sprinting through glass hallways I forget everything I've been so far, right now I'm just a piece of a puzzle. And this puzzle needs solving. I'm here to get missing pieces.

Tomorrow 15 newborns will begin forgetting and she won't remember doing that to them. She reads what her job is every morning. Who knows if she even does the same job every day, maybe this was her first day on the job, maybe it was her last.

After finishing up the newborns she goes back to the screen for further guidelines.

The newborns regularly get new doses, this is handled by a separate facility. Upon their return to this facility which happens after a year and a half, you have to set their brain. This will make all the changes we have worked on permanent, it's only then that we can guarantee them a fulfilling life, but more importantly we can preserve the fabric of society.

BLARE! WEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOW.

The alarms went off. I've got to rush. Left. Then right. Finally I arrive at the one year old cages. I grab a kid. Sh, don't cry. I put her in my backpack that was hidden under my bed this morning. I run. She doesn't scream but is clearly not at ease either. I run on, begging my feet to keep going. My calves burn like hell.

She hears the alarm, but of course has no idea what to do. No one ever told her what an alarm is so she covers her ears and crouches under a table. She whispers nonsense to herself to keep her brain busy while unknowable screeching drowns out everything. She can't see, hear or think anymore, it's too loud. And she doesn't know what it is. Suddenly a man with a kid strapped to his back barges in panting. He tells her he needs a newborn. She doesn't seem to hear him so he just continues his mission.

What a peculiar lady. I leave the room and enter the next one. I hope the plans aren't wrong about where they keep the newborns, I really hoped the lady'd help me. It suddenly strikes me that she probably didn't get a note explaining that there will be a loud noise rattling the whole building. She must be petrified. It is the room for newborns! I grab one, a boy this time, exactly how the instructions explained. I rush back to the lady. I think she can't hear me, so I just hold her hand and I mouth: "It will be fine." Her posture softens a bit, but I really don't

have more time for this. This is bigger than her. I'm sorry and I run away onto the streets with two children strapped to my back.

She's still crouching under a table as the loud sound continues pressing her into the ground, the man returned for a second. She wonders who he is, but it doesn't matter in the face of the world collapsing or whatever is making that noise. A few minutes that felt like hours later another man enters the room, finally the alarms stop, asking about the man that just left the building. He demands a description saying he's security, but she can't tell him anything except for the fact that she saw only bright green circles of light pulsating with the screech, it was the best way her mind could make sense of what was happening. "Useless bitch." the security man says as he leaves her to herself again. "Don't leave." She asks him still, but he has nothing to tell her other than that she's permitted to resume her work. So she slowly gets up and continues watching the instruction video.

I keep running. I've got to keep running. The mission. I have the way memorized and I know exactly where to go. I turn behind an obscure bar and enter the basement. I'm so glad it's actually there. I have no idea what I'd do if it turned out to be a lie.

I push aside the bead curtains. I imagine every bead being a memory taken from my empty mind for it is truly empty now except for a list of actions I have or had to do today. The gray walls don't feel as welcoming as the smell of paper that slowly fills my lungs. I like the smell, it feels as I imagine home would.

The girl on my back kicks me, waking me up from my descent into indulgence. I put the two kids on the floor and call out for anyone.

A young lady appears from a dimly lit kitchen off to the side gesturing me to cover my mouth, I copy her odd movement before I realise I'm not allowed to yell. In a whisper she tells me: "Welcome again, you did well, there's only one step left to do before your job is finished."

"Have we met already?"

"We must have."

"You don't remember?"

"Of course I don't, that's what the kids are for. They're part of a complex plan for the better of society."

"How do you know so much?"

She tries to rub some paper pulp off her finger as she thinks of an answer, which I anticipate with great excitement. I need to know everything, but she doesn't tell me everything, she tells me: "You found notes beside your bed this morning.

I found notes too, we differ only in how much notes we can store. I live down here where they never check according to my papers. I read the story of my life every morning all over again. It's likely I read it in a slightly different manner every day, making me a new person every day, but with the same goal, which we share too."

I try to process what she just said before speaking, but there's more important things now. We're just pawns. I ask what we do with the kids now.

The apartment was lit by a small warm light. A coat was hung over the chair in the kitchen while the soon to be pronounced mother sat on her bed trying to recover a bit of strength after her exhausting day working at the garage. As she leaned back thinking of taking a nap, someone knocked on her door. "Come in." Two figures unknown to her entered her apartment, upon closer inspection her eyes noticed the kids on the man's back. She realises that the letter under her pillow told the truth, she had accepted to become the mum of the children that were going to save the world. The lady next to the man takes off her sunglasses and introduces herself as Sophie. Upon gently being placed on the ground the one year old girl immediately makes a clumsy attempt at standing up and runs a few steps towards her newfound mother before falling on the carpet. The newborn boy is softly put on the kitchen table. "Keep an eye on him" The man instructs the mother as he helps Sophie unpack all the necessary supplies. Sophie explains: "You will now have to decide on their names, make sure you write them down and I will have to write them down too. I will be passing by occasionally to drop off some necessities and to check on the kids. You-", she now turns to the man, "will have to leave before she says the name, you will forget the address and everything that happened today. A colleague has already cleared out all the notes you had for today's plan, you are a normal citizen again. Thank you for your help. Now leave."

CHAPTER IV

The sun has risen and my alarm goes off. I lift my heavy eyelids and try to think of my name. Cecilia. I actually remembered today, impressive. Suddenly so much red seeps into my mind. The bike. The crash. No. Not now. I get out of bed to go through my notes about who I am like every day.

There's a warning note. It tells me to beware of a lady with orange glasses and red hair. I'm feeling slightly paranoid, perhaps I had a nightmare, perhaps it's because of the weird lady, but anyway I have to go to work.

I look through the window as I gather anything I think I should take. It's raining outside. On my way out of my apartment with my coat in my hand in the process of putting it on I glance at my neighbors door which strikes me as off despite my inability to put into words what exactly feels wrong. With the coat now over my shoulder I hover over to the peculiar door. There's a smell, of course I don't know what it is, but it smells strangely clean, before I can knock a family I don't believe I've seen before reaches my floor. I greet them and in a fake hurry I make my way down the stairs. Glancing upwards I notice them enter the apartment next to mine and an authoritative voice from within tells them something I can't quite decipher. I'm already late and should go to my garage, but I can't quite shake the conviction that today will be a strange day for me.

The sound of raindrops has always calmed Phoebe. This morning, as she does every morning, she reads her notes. Today her calendar gave her a task. Every morning she grieves someone, whose notes she still uses, that signed them as Sophie, the dates on these notes suddenly stop a few years ago thus Phoebe can only assume Sophie died, so she grieves.

Her notes speak of an intricately woven system of forgetting, it spans birth, childhood and even the water from the tap works in favor of the status quo.

Distracted while looking at a man I recognise even less than my other coworkers, I work myself a blister which makes me impulsively rush to the tap. A coworker expresses his shock: "You remember where the tap is!"

"I... I just felt like I should do this."

"That's crazy!"

Feeling like a freak with the burning pain from my thumb under the cold tap water I start to wonder how little others know.

You have one unread notification in File Cecilia.

/notifs open

Cecilia:new:data

Note: Urgent

/printData File:Cecilia (sort:newToOld)

Page 1 of 4:

Monitoring: Cecilia has communicated about memory to a coworker according to Ralph.off. Action requested.

Phoebe fixes her red hair as she walks past the large mirror in her room, beside it her orange glasses which she picks up right before she heads above ground. She's to find a girl named Cecilia. Yesterday's Phoebe seems certain that this girl is still alive, so down the street she heads with her mission ingrained in her consciousness.

She passes lots of people and occasionally wonders: Do I recognise them? Her eyes seem to have more memory than her brain so with every face that enters her field of view she wonders if she's seen it before and often the answer feels like yes. A thought. I want a friend. She doesn't really know what that even means, friendship must've died long ago on the same battlefield that took love to the other side. What is friendship but memories from two perspectives that bleed into each other through an osmosis-like process we call love. We called love. Her only friend exists only on paper, her only friend might've been dead for a few years or might've never existed. Sophie's a concept above a person to Phoebe. Can you befriend a concept?

/newMessage to:Alysa.gov, /off

Subject?

/submit "Cecilia: Action authorized"

Now writing message to Alysa.gov and /off:

Permission for action has been granted. Further details are confidential and are to be discussed without admin. Removing self from file.

/leaveFile

Are you sure? Y/N

/submit Y

The man I didn't recognise earlier approaches me. Should I run? Should I keep my hand under the cool water? I get my breath under control and ask: "Can I help you, sir?"

"Yes, I have a question for you: Do you recall?"

"What? Do I recall what?"

“That’s all. This is just standard memory confirmation procedure”

I’m petrified. This is not a normal day. This is far from a normal day. I can feel my throat constricting itself as if a rat is trying to crawl out of my lungs but my neck can’t allow it. The neck muscles seem to contract and close in. Air- I need air. My pupils twirl around their eye white cages like ants on cocaine as I rush outside. The world suddenly collapses very slowly. The sky comes crashing down in its characteristic stillness as I stand outside gasping for any amount of oxygen to enter my lungs. I can touch the clouds. The world. My hands. I am. Am I? Air- I need air. I look at my blister and fuck it hurts like hell. I inhale and blow onto my burning finger. I’m breathing. Slowly I return back to earth.

Luckily there’s no lock on the apartment block door allowing Phoebe to easily find her way to the third floor. Politely and perhaps foolishly she knocks, that’s what her notes said to do with some doors, maybe not all doors. No one opens so she takes the weird metal thing out of her pocket and inserts it into the lock. She swiftly twists it and nothing. A second attempt doesn’t yield much better results. Her mind palace being empty doesn’t offer much solace, but still there’s notes scattered throughout her head. She’s practiced lockpicking before on the small door in the basement. But it seems even some muscle memory gets lost, so she scouts her knowledge for any hints and finds a vague image of a crudely drawn diagram she revisited this morning. Step by step, she pries open pin after pin and the lock clicks, letting her in.

She sneaks into the apartment hoping to see no living soul in there. And indeed no one’s there. The only sounds are made by the gentle tapping of her shoes on the carpet. The apartment seems empty and bare. Remarkably few notes catch Phoebe’s attention when she inspects the bed. She rereads the note she’s leaving and places the pill bottle exactly where the letter tells Cecilia she’ll find it-on the second shelf counting from the top in the cupboard on the left.

In silence she sneaks back out the way she came in as she questions who she did this for. No one asked her, she just read a note, she assumed to be of her own making, asking her to leave a note for a girl she’s never met, but still she feels more connected to Cecilia than to anyone else. It isn’t surprising seeing as Cecilia is the only person that exists today and will still exist tomorrow. Whence memories come they’ll disappear again tonight, but Cecilia will return brought back by countless pages in drawers and plans on Phoebe’s walls.

There’s something off about my door, I hold the handle and I question whether I had properly locked it this morning. Probably, since it’s locked. I don’t disrupt anything upon entering because there’s no one in my apartment, but I felt like

there could've been someone and I still feel a bit paranoid walking through my room. I roam around and look for clues as to what might've provoked this weird feeling of a someone being here. I rather quickly notice a piece of paper. It's fresh paper, it's not dusty yellowed paper like my own notes are written on, it's rough, it has specks and a greyish tint. I pick it up and read what it says. It speaks of a savior and it puts that role upon me. It speaks of pills in the pantry too, which I go and grab and put in front of me next to the note as I sit on the soft carpet and meditate over the contents of the letter. It praises my memory and claims it can fix it-with the pills, of course. It's a small bottle, it's made from a dark tinted glass, inside it small red ellipsoids found a shelter. I pour a few of the pills onto my hand to examine their vermilion shade from up close. I know nothing, but taking pills you found in your pantry, claiming to make you perfect? I put the pills back into the bottle and now take hold of the note.

It almost grips my fingers back as I read the simple phrases over and over. It becomes almost numbing as I digest what they mean. What does it mean to be chosen when you can't even remember well if you'd deserve it-to be a savior. What even is a savior?

I think of the man. The man in the garage that asked me that perturbing question: "Do you recall?" I do. Not much, but I do. I know I'll recall today tomorrow. The man and the letter dance together in my head to the rhythm of my finger tapping the carpet. I keep on tapping the carpet but speed up as the bike barges in. Red. My finger frantically tapping. As the pieces of my mother on the carpet clump together to smile at me one more time they reveal the blood stains beneath my skin. The man walks by and asks me the same question again while I try to read the sentences someone left for me and- and- the pills still wait for me in their bottle. They would make me remember. It's the water isn't it? Making us forget.

A thought strikes me. Did this letter appear today? Did I miss it this morning and maybe it's been here for days. If I haven't taken it then, maybe I certainly shouldn't now. Or maybe I should if they speak truth. I stand up and walk a circle around the familial flesh seeping blood into the carpet. I don't feel disgust, I feel shame. There's two corpses on the carpet in my apartment that I've failed without even remembering how but I know I did. The man refuses to give me the space I need with the history playing out in the endless time between the ceiling and floor. He asks once more: "do you recall?". Distracted from the violence I mindlessly follow the man past the crashed airbike into my kitchen onto the counter where we sit next to each other. I ask him: "Will I die?"

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Wandering through this city brings Phoebe calmth she desperately needs as her heart is racing and pounding while she approaches Cecilia's block that she just left a short while ago. Still shaking and shuddering, she notices a man in uniform, but it's a particular uniform Phoebe's seen in her notes, it tells her to rush inside. Racing up the first level of stairs goes fast but she needs to be a lot faster. Step after step as her toes might start bleeding with the amount of times she's stubbing her toes on these thin stairs. Her feet almost run out from beneath her body as she arrives on the second floor. Faster. Step. Step. Step. Third floor and she screams: "CECILIA!"

I hear my name.

Phoebe knocks on, bangs on and punches the door she unlocked and locked again earlier. The mumbles under her breath grow into another growl shaking the floor: "CECILIA!"

While screaming for I know not what else to do, I open the door to come face to face with the weird lady from my notes. Her face contorts as she processes my existence. "Cecilia?", she asks. I look at her in silence as I let her in, but she doesn't want in, she wants me out. I ask her: "Are you the weird lady from my notes?"

"I'm Phoebe."

"I'm Cecilia."

"Did you read my note? Did you take the pills?"

"Yes. No."

As I say this I take a step back further into my apartment. She follows.

How much Phoebe'd give to have Cecilia trust her right now. How much she'd give for Cecilia to be her friend right now. Both of them stand in the center of the carpet posed like they're about to dance, but the dance remains metaphorical as Phoebe continues trying to persuade Cecilia to follow her outside and Cecilia keeps rejecting her advances.

I'm not leaving the apartment with the weird lady. I'm not taking the weird pills nor am I believing myself to be anything out of the ordinary. The weird lady, Phoebe, picks up the note and the pills bottle. I ask her: "What are you doing?"
"We're leaving right now."
"I'm not."

She clearly thinks of a way to get me outside and before I-

A quick movement lands Phoebe's hand around Cecilia's arm. And with a strong pull fueled by determination and with pills and a piece of paper in her other hand Phoebe pulls Cecilia out of her apartment. At first a lot of resistance makes the two run slower than walking pace.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

I give in. Together me and Phoebe run out of the building, and as I scream at Phoebe hoping for an explanation I'm interrupted by a rumble followed by an explosion blowing my window and a chunk of wall away and landing it on the other side of the now empty street. I don't have time to think of my mom and brother crying out from beneath the fresh rubble when I hold Phoebe's hand and she pulls me away from this scene I've seen before. It's different this time.

CHAPTER V

I wake up coughing. Feeling like I've swallowed gravel. Empty minded I look around before I see a stack of notes gathered next to me. I reach for them and study them one by one to find out who I am and where and what I'm supposed to do.

I'm a priest. I have a bible somewhere that the cards ordered me to scan through. I wonder if I can stand if I leave this bed. I can and walk to the nearest door to open it. Behind it I discover another room containing a book upon a centered wooden table I assume must be this bible I should browse through with a calendar beside it. When I pick it up a few pieces of paper fall out onto the patterned carpet. Before I pick them up I spend a second admiring the paintings on the walls. They mean nothing to me so I pick up the pages. They're printed. On the first one a boldly printed title catches my eye:

TWO SAVOIRS TAKEN FROM A LAB - ROAD TO FREEDOM OPENED
Yesternight a brave accomplice succeeded in their mission to save two children from the default procedures. One kid will live with the capacity to remember, but will still be affected by the water, but the other is a 10/10 memory specimen despite the effects of the water. Soon we'll be free.

Perplexed after reading this paragraph I compare the date in the top corner to the date on the calendar. It's old it seems, which doesn't hold much meaning in my memoryless world. I cross out another day on the calendar and hope I never forgot one. What will we be saved from I wonder. Will we remember? My hand reaches for the next page on the floor.

BIKE CRASH - TRAGEDY KILLS 14

In the early morning an airbike flew into a crowd of people instantly killing 14 bystanders. Only one bystander is known to be seriously injured, the rest seems untouched by the incident. Discussions of banning airbikes have commenced.

Aye, that does sound dangerous and should be banned, I find myself agreeing without knowing what an airbike is. I ponder, insistently pacing circles round the table, my reasoning for collecting these texts for I need not to know what rules I am governed by to feel that these are dangerous words to write onto paper or to keep stored in one's home with clearly little effort to conceal them since they're kept in a book central to this room I've now walked four rounds in before once more stooping down to pick up another piece of paper.

THE WATER - WHY YOU FORGET

Keeping it brief since we don't have resources to publish all our findings. Before we enter this world we exist as fetuses in a cylinder somewhere in a lab, where the first doses of brain altering drugs are administered to the newborns making them already prone to forgetting. These are then conditioned for about a year before the setting procedure commences which causes them to have permanent sensitivity to a chemical causing memory loss in the water, but also permanently worsens their memory. All accessible water follows a chemical cycle that deletes memories, surprisingly even rain water isn't clear because large amounts of fumes are pumped into the air when it's about to rain. Lastly do not stop drinking the treated water, the withdrawal effects' lethality surpasses the memory related benefits by miles.

I'm not sure if I want to believe that my lack of knowledge is unnatural. I woke up like this, I feel no change in me and I recall no different world. I can't even imagine this "memory" it claims we lost. It's a word I can explain the meaning of verbally without ever feeling the meaning of it. It's knowledge of the day that came before today and before that. But I know not what that entails. It's an abstraction. I know nothing but the tales I'm reading now in a book that seems important. The bible I might've read on a table that's been here for the entire duration of my life as far as I will ever be able to tell provides me with a mystery I probably solve daily.

Having had breakfast, I decide to follow the remaining instructions. Before I leave I grant the book a bit more attention. It's cover: leather. Despite their yellowed warmth the pages feel cold to the touch, "like corpses", I mutter. The paintings on the walls still mean nothing to me, but I understand their judgement now. The figures crooked and ancient, created long before my birth. I study their stories while walking towards the church, keeping one eye on my notebook and the other on the road. Thankfully signalling guides me to the majestic construction now before me. It's beyond human. It must have been built with so many hands that they amalgamate into a singular god-like entity in my thoughts. It's the only way I can make sense of this feat. Unnatural. As I creep closer, I take in every small rebellious knick in the rocks that belonged to neither man nor god before they were tamed into these walls.

Once inside, surrounded by walls and glass panes, my steps echo their own sermon as I approach the altar. The warm sunlight feels colder in here. The faces of glass that let the light in never smile, they judge, they watch. So do the statues. With a thud I open the bible and look at the door waiting for my fellow

insects to enter. Standing on this stage, I realise I'm above today. It's me telling them the story of how everything can be taken from them, and how they'll be thankful for the lesson. I'm teaching how to submit. The ant's body was never hers but since birth has belonged to the wasp that eventually killed her. It was foretold so. It's what Jesus proved the ultimate good is: suffering only to ask "Father, why hast thou abandoned me?" without receiving an answer. I correct my posture and prepare myself to address the small crowd that gathered in my church today. I don't yell, but speak firmly to project the authority the notes told me I'm to emit.

When a few confused people approach me after sermon the crowd dissolves into individuals with separate stories, short ones of course. I assume it happens daily. I bless the old lady. I forgive the young man. I listen to the fears of the girl who came here with her mum. The thousand-eyed cat monster isn't going to eat her. Then behind another lady's eyes a deep grief has taken refuge, I notice and she affirms. Neither of us has the means to find out who she lost, so she leaves unconsoled and her red hair glistening in the warm sunlight is the last I see of her, before the bright daylight drowns her silhouette out. I wish I could help, yet I just stand here, now alone surrounded by unimaginable grandeur. I'm trying to imagine losing someone, frankly I can't.

I take a seat on one of the wooden benches. I wait. Quietly. Peacefully. I hear the beating in my chest. I hear the sound of my breath strolling along the central corridor like a ghost looking for the meaning keeping it in this realm. I wonder what a ghost is. I wonder why I wait. What for? Something in my body knows something I don't and I trust it. Something in me knows that I will not sit alone on this bench for long. But the wait doesn't stop with a sudden door swing. It doesn't stop at all. Hours of silent thought pass, the sun has set. And I go home. I wonder if this is what losing someone feels like. The wait for something to happen, because you need it to happen. And you can't articulate it, so you simply take a seat and hope salvation comes in a different form today.

Somebody died last night. I feel it.

CHAPTER VI

I follow Phoebe through bead curtains into the dimly lit basement where the walls are littered with yellowed paper, the concrete ceiling holds a hundred tiny colored lights surrounding a central dysfunctional plastic chandelier and the peeling crimson-ochre patterned carpet reveals generations-old wooden floorboards. The air feels dry and dusty. I let my finger glide across the remarkably clean wooden cabinet admiring its doors' deep turquoise finish and notice shallow childish carvings, barely scratches, on its side. There's a tall figure surrounded by smaller figures, presumably a bunch of children.

"Did you have kids here?" I ask, but Phoebe's already in the next room calling me over. I stand in the messily raspberry red painted door frame and peek into the azure floor-tiled kitchen where Phoebe, sitting on the phthalo green counter with her head bent to fit under the ultramarine cupboards, has placed a glass of water beside herself. She gestures to me still standing in the doorframe to enter the kitchen and I do. When I'm sat next to her she pulls out the pill bottle and puts it beside the glass between us.

"Cecilia...", Phoebe's voice sounded uncertain, "I'm... happy I met you."

The air stood still. Stiller than usual, before she continued. "You're a person... And I mean of course you are, but... you have a personality that I got to meet a little bit, and I'm glad I did. Cecilia."

She spoke my name with such tenderness and such softness as if caressing my ears. After a pause she continued. "I want to make memories together, I want to remember you... I don't want you to swallow this pill by yourself."

I think about what Phoebe just said. It feels important yet so fleeting. She doesn't know what it means to remember death.

"I don't want to take it."

"You don't want to take it?"

After a sigh I try to voice my reasoning, I try to utter words, but they get stuck in my throat, it closes like my clenched fist. I try to unclench but I just feel my heartbeat in my fingertips, palm and wrist. I'm drowning, the air left the room. I look straight at her, but also at the cupboard, floor and the grooves between tiles, I follow an ant with my eyes. I stare into everything and nothing. And nothing crosses my mind so I just gesture broadly, like I'm accenting a point I can't bring myself to make. In my head I'm speaking an amount of sentences I can't count and not a sound escapes. Stuck.

"Are you okay? Do you want some water?" Her hand reaches for the glass and mine slowly jolts in her general exact direction as I try to shake yes and grab the glass. "Yeah... Fine..." I whisper while time gently stretches back into familiar

rhythms.

"You seem stressed."

She seems genuinely worried, but what for, she doesn't know me. And I don't know her. We're strangers. I struggle to reply, I always do. But some honesty makes its way onto my tongue.

"I am stressed. Everything's weird. We almost died... I don't know you. You don't know me and we're sitting in a kitchen somewhere underground." I take a breath and continue. "And you want me to take some random pill to remember. Do you know how it hurts to remember? Do you know?"

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to anger you."

"I'm not angry."

"I thought... but you seem... because you seem mad at me?"

"Scared. I'm scared."

"... Do you want some tea maybe?"

I take a sip of tea Phoebe just made me while she stirs hers sitting across from me on the red carpet. Between us she placed the pills and glasses of water. I avoid looking directly at Phoebe and instead lock my eyes onto the wooden cabinet. I can feel her unease. I focus on her breathing, it's slow but irregular. In the corner of my eyes I can see her repeatedly raise the pills a couple centimeters off the ground just to put them down again. She raises the bottle and puts it back down again. Raises it, puts it down. Raises, puts down. Raises and down. Again. I move to reposition my legs and inevitably lock eyes with her. She looks like she wants to speak so I don't move and remain in this intermediate awkward leg placement.

"... Are we friends?"

I settle into a more comfortable position and let her continue her thought.

"I had a friend once, I think... I'm not sure. Her name was Sophie, I think. I don't know why I'm telling you this, but I think I miss her. If I'm being honest I don't know what that even means, maybe this feeling is just human, but... I just want to remember someone... I hope this isn't weird, but I'd like to remember you, I think."

I'm waiting for her to ask me to take the pill again, but she doesn't, she just looks at me. There's something sad behind her watery eyes, a certain deadness to the shimmer the reflections of the colorful lights paint cold and gray now. The gold shine of her hazel eyes doesn't have the elegance of a precious metal anymore, there's a certain brittleness to her irises now, a certain instability that matches the rest of her melancholic demeanor. I watch her bring her hand to the pill bottle. She opens it and puts a pill in her hand. After she puts the bottle back

down she looks at the pill in her palm.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Isn't it obvious? I want to remember, Cecilia."

"Will it work on you?"

"Not really, just a little bit. I might remember your name, maybe your face. Cecilia, maybe we'll be able to recognise each other... If you take it too, we can both... Do you really not want to try?"

"Fine."

I'm surprised by my own answer. My hand reaches for Phoebe's cheek and I wipe a tear from her face. I wonder if we're still strangers. Something shifted for I don't care about anything anymore: I don't think I'm a part of this world anymore, someone blew up my apartment. Someone dragged me into this place, I'm moved more than I move myself and the people on the street still just go from place to place like ants every single day as if nothing ever changes. The world keeps racing forward regardless of what happens to me. Or to Phoebe. Or to anyone. I think the world died. I really do. Maybe Phoebe's alive, or maybe she will be. She cares, but even she'll forget and exist unfazed tomorrow, and so will I. Tomorrow I will never have wiped her tears and she'll never have asked if I'm okay. We might as well be dead, so I grab the bottle and put a pill onto my hand. I look at Phoebe, her eyes lit up a little bit, it makes me happy. She dries her eyes with her sleeve and looks uncertain now.

"You're aware that there's risks? I don't want to pressure you into-"

"I don't care."

Phoebe looks at me surprised, as if to ask if I'm sure. Her mouth twitches as if she's trying to argue, but what for? And we sit in silence for a minute or so before we each grab our glass, whisper some encouragement to one another and then each swallow our pill.

There's a silence in this room. There's an intensity to the air. There's a softness too. Phoebe speaks with her eyes and I ask if she's alright the same way too. When do we start remembering? Dismembering the past into small pieces of stories. Series of memories like a pearl necklace. I feel a tickle in my head and I care less. Thoughts trickle down over my eyes. I see. The carpet curls upward and twirls around me and Phoebe. And the ceiling dotted with glowing specks of colors swirls like birds in the sky free or maybe fish in the sea. I stand up and knock over the cup of tea Phoebe made. I trade with the brain. It deals in knowledge. Like a librarian presenting books saved after a library fire. As if Caesar passed by. I try to recall, I try to watch like a fly on the wall. And I see another Phoebe watching another me from a distant bench. I watch myself get

freaked out. Running about, around and away. I look over at what I assume is the real Phoebe. She doesn't seem to see us on the town square. I'm walking through the street and I recognise someone, and another one and I trip and the scenery flips to a darker place, there's dark stained bricks all around us, the carpet and cabinet have never looked this out of place. I pace around in the reddish light. I think I'm lost. I'm a young girl running like sweat on my forehead. Like butter melting on toast and mom's in the kitchen. I keep running, face red-lit. Utter something, onto a steep hill, I sprint- And my throat becomes prey to a snake-constrictor. I try to wipe the blood off my hands, frantically, stained the carpet redder than it was. Someone bled there and it was dark and sunny. I lean on the cabinet, trying to remain upright. I hear Phoebe's voice call for me but it fades into loud panicked screams of the crowd. Like a drop in a pool of blood. My brother folds something out of a sheet of paper, it looks like a bike. Tapered at the end and it ends up striking a crowd after growing into a roadsized metal beast feasting on fresh flesh, flashing by me- and flowing blood. Red. Red. Red. Pools up in my irises, pupils and behind my corneas. Stains. The girl runs away. Her mom, my mother, lies on the carpet floor, next to my brother and six other people. The road sticks to the girl's feet and the smell won't go. Nothing's well. She's running. She runs far. As far as she can. I can't follow so I stay here with dead people and Phoebe's here too. My eyes want to leave their sockets, but tears flow out instead. I sob. I barely breathe and begin begging my throat for air. I drop to the carpet floor. Thud and my eyes involuntarily squint, I look for Phoebe but I see a different woman in her place, and a man. Peripherally I see two small children. The room's too tall to get up again so I decide to crawl. I pull myself closer to a kid I think I know. I know you. I watch the infant take a coin from the floor and bring it to her mouth. "No, don't". No reaction, but after trying to bite it she decides to take it out again. She then tumbles over to the cabinet, pulled as if by a magnet. Passionately she scratches the old wood. I wish I stood up, because I think I won't now for good, I think I'm dying. The man approaches the child and picks it up. "Why'd you scratch that?". I try to answer that it's the syringe lady, but I feel as if something's shaking me, I realize I see nothing, I went blind a few minutes ago. I try to think of why, I realize I can't think either. And I try to remember what happened, but I remember too much to pick out a moment. And I try to hear but can't. I try to speak but can't. Scream but can't. ... I think I'm dying.

Cecilia!

Cecilia! Wake up!

CECILIA!

SAY SOMETHING!

Blink! Please. Anything.

Phoebe sits on the floor. Trying to not look at Cecilia's bloody face. Her eyes and nose bled for a good ten minutes before the bleeding slowed and her heart rate and breathing stopped. Phoebe tried every idea she could find in her notes, but Cecilia never woke up.

A young man enters the room to find Phoebe beside Cecilia's lifeless body. He approaches Phoebe to ask what happened, but she just points at Cecilia in silence. The man investigates the pill bottle.

"She took two?"

"No, we each took one."

"How do you feel?"

"How do you think I feel?!"

"Hm. I'm sorry. I do need to know if your memory changed."

"... I don't know, I just hope I can remember Cecilia... I want to miss her instead of forgetting. I want her to haunt me in my sleep and waking hours. I want to see her face for as long as I live."

The man puts the pill bottle into his pocket, thanks Phoebe for her work and leaves with a promise that someone will come to clean the basement later today.

CHAPTER VII

"There once was a girl - Cecilia, she was remarkable because she could remember. Do you know what remembering is, sweetheart? It's knowing what happened before.

And there was also a boy- her brother, who was going to remember even better. But sadly he died before we could see what his life had in store.

There is this laboratory, where they both, where all kids grow up, but they were brought outside so they could recall, but there's more.

A couple years later the government discovered that Cecilia could remember, so they sent their member to go and kill her.

But luckily there was this other lady- Phoebe. And Phoebe came to Cecilia and she pulled her out of the apartment and just when they were outside... BOOM!

She saved Cecilia from her doom and they ran to a secret basement underground where she gave Cecilia a pill so she could remember even better still.

And it worked! Cecilia could remember everything.

And together with her team she followed her calling.

And they went into a laboratory to steal some supplies.

And when the guard asked them who they were, they told some lies.

I don't know what they said, but I'm sure it was something silly and the stupid guard believed them and let them pass or maybe he was in on it, what do you think?

And when then they were almost caught they ran far far away where they now work very hard to help us all remember.

It's a pretty story, isn't it, and it's a true story! It's not a story I could often tell in my church, but I think it's a very good story."

He then lied down for a second before turning his head towards me once again.

"I forgot so many more important stories, I'm sorry kiddo."

It's a shame grandpa can't tell us these stories in a more pleasant place than this cold room in this elderly home. His wrinkles are a storyteller's battle scars and he braces himself to produce a bit more wisdom he must've learned from the notebook beside him.

"You know, kiddo, only in stories there are gods, but here within our profane reality there is no higher purpose to worship. I ask you to not put your trust in higher powers, but to trust the people you share this earth with, and love them. Love them despite everything. And if ever you do need God, everything that you call divine can

be found in our merely human realm. After all, only human hands can dry your tears, little one. Only human hands."

It's then that a man in a darkly tinted uniform enters the room, gun in hand. I'll never know what exactly happened, but I firmly believe the man had the courtesy to not shoot grandpa in before my eyes, but did so a few rooms down the corridor. And tomorrow everything will be forgotten again and I will read this and know that yesterday was not in fact today, and that some tomorrow will be better.

THE END

This is a tale about memories and stories. And a bunch of other stuff.

I wrote it specifically to explore themes I didn't have room to explore in the project I'm trying to focus on right now, so I'd love for you to read it with the same curiosity I wrote it with. It's only 27 pages so I can't be bothered to write an actual synopsis, but just read it, it's literally free :) (or at least there is a free pdf online)

Now, about copyright, this little book is free. It's free because it's silly for ideas and thus art to be hidden behind a paywall. Don't take that to mean I don't think artists should be paid, because free art and paid artists aren't in conflict with one another, have a look at Kim Diaz Holm (Really, go check him out, I mean it!). This book is also free in the sense of free speech, I don't get to use copyright to dictate what you say. Therefore I release it under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike license. Now go read the damn book!

-Victoria (august 2025)